

2-2009

Our University - Quality and Quantity

Walter V. Wendler

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, wendler@siu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc

Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our University - Quality and Quantity" (2009). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 39.
http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/39

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Our University - Quality and Quantity

When James Walker was president of SIU, he said that he would rather see a very good university of 18,000 students than a mediocre one with 23,000.

President James Walker understood universities and how they work.

Jim knew that if quality is high too many students are the problem not too few. This is not necessarily true for community colleges, regional universities, or liberal arts colleges. Each is different, each with its own purpose and attractions.

For example in the case of community colleges and their taxing authorities location is paramount. Local people pay local taxes for access to the community college. People attend because it is convenient. If a community college has people from other nations, it is usually because they live in the neighborhood, or they want to get into a university that is close by and has strong transfer relationships. However, it is not uncommon for a research university to have students from 100 different countries. We do.

Likewise, the quality of the university is not determined by its size. Princeton, Caltech, MIT, Dartmouth and Rice, are among the very best universities in the world, and the largest of the lot MIT has 10,220 and Caltech only 2,133. Small by most definitions.

Liberal arts colleges are even smaller. Of the best, Amherst, Williams, and Swarthmore only one cracks 2,000 students by a few dozen.

Small but powerful.

Size is not important in relationship to quality except for reaching critical mass in selected disciplines, and this is an academic matter. After that, size is meaningless.

The local merchants in any university community will tell you that they would not trade the research university for a community college of 2 or 3 times the size. The real value of long term investment - economic development - does not come from size alone. The related enterprise of a community in which a very good research university resides, is more important than the range of restaurants or the number of retail outlets or filling stations. These things follow quality too.

Quality breeds resources and business.

Striving to be big is not the same thing as striving to be good, and the latter always wins in the end. Becoming smaller to increase quality could be a powerful posture for a university to take. For example, if increasing entering ACT scores or class rank of entering freshman drives down size for a season, it will

increase competitiveness and quality for a generation. Some claim this is exclusivity and creates a class system.

It does in this sense: The people who come to study at excellent universities mean business, and that means business.

Last week our pastor reflected on playing sandlot baseball. He recalled that as often as not there was an odd number of people available to play, and as a youngster he always wanted to get on the team with the most players, assuming that size would give the team a leg up. He soon figured out, that if you got on the smaller team and it had the fastest runners and some home run hitters, ability would trump size every time.

In defending a policy of open admissions at the City University of New York that utterly failed and nearly ruined a once proud institution that counts Jonas Salk among its graduates, Robert J. Kibbee only got it half right: *“The quality of a university is measured more by the kind of student it turns out than the kind it takes in”*.

The Southern Illinois preacher understood the equation.